F. & H. BENNING COMPANY
1014 Benning Road
Galesville
Anne Arundel County
Maryland

HAER MD-138
MD-138

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

F. & H. BENNING COMPANY

HAER No. MD-138

LOCATION:	1014 Benning Road, Galesville, Anne Arundel County, Maryland
DATE OF CONSTRUCTION:	ca. 1913
ARCHITECT/ BUILDER:	Unknown
SIGNFICANCE:	At the beginning of the twentieth century the oyster industry was booming in Maryland with small waterfront communities like Galesville home to various seafood processing companies. The F. & H. Benning Company was one such small company, located in two buildings on the banks of Tenthouse Creek that have not been significantly altered, although most of the machinery has since been removed.
HISTORIAN:	Justine Christianson, HAER Historian, 2004-2007
PROJECT INFORMATION:	This project was undertaken by the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER), a division of the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Todd Croteau, HAER Maritime Program Coordinator, produced large format photography. For information on the F. & H. Benning Company's Oyster Mill, now a part of the Calvert Marine Museum collection, see HAER No. MD-135.

INTRODUCTION

By 1880, the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, like Tenthouse Creek on which the Benning family located its oystering operations, had "the most prolific and valuable oyster beds in the world."[1] Oyster packing houses sprang up in the numerous waterfront communities in the Chesapeake Bay region. There were many reasons for the development of the industry in Maryland. As agriculture in the West took hold and importation of agricultural goods from the East subsequently declined, Maryland farmers found other ways to supplement their incomes.[2] The decline of oyster resources in the North due to overfishing further boosted the oyster industry in Maryland and made it a profitable venture; in fact, by the 1860s, Baltimore held the distinction of being the oyster canning capital of the country. Maryland oyster packing houses supplied customers across the country with fresh and canned oysters.

Galesville, located on Tenthouse Creek, was one of many small Maryland waterfront communities that responded to the primacy of oysters in the state economy.[3] Joseph Smith established one of the first oyster packing houses in Galesville. He later sold the property to Herman Woodfield, Sr., who established Woodfield Fish & Oyster Company with William F. Woodfield in 1917. In 2004, the operation was still in business.[4] Other early packing houses in the Galesville area included one owned by William Zang, who operated a fish, oyster and crab house, and E.N. Dixon, who owned an oyster house.[5]

The Bennings came to Galesville in July 1901, and the father, Carl, purchased 9-3/4 acres of land on Tenthouse Creek. His sons, Frank and Harry, purchased the property from him in 1913 and established F. & H. Benning Company, "Dealers in Oysters, Lime, Soft Crabs and Fish." Their main local competition was the nearby Woodfield Fish & Oyster Company. In 1957, Harry retired from the business, allegedly frustrated with increasingly stringent state regulations concerning oyster packing. After his retirement, the Evans Company leased the building and continued the business for a short time. After Harry's death, the Crandells purchased it because they needed waterfront property for their marine construction company. In 2004, Mast & Mallet,

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[1] George Brown Goode, "A Geographical Review of the Fisheries Industries and Fishing Communities for the Year 1880," *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1887), 429.

[2] G. Terry Sharrer, "The Patuxent Fisheries: Transformations of a Rural Economy, 1880-1985," in Paula J. Johnson, ed., *Working the Water: The Commercial Fisheries of Maryland's Patuxent River* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1988), 4. Although Sharrer is specifically talking about Patuxent area oyster houses, the shift from a predominately agricultural economy to one based on both maritime and agriculture seem applicable to other parts of the state.

[3] Jean Siegert Trott, *Galesville, Maryland: The Legend...The Legacy* (Annapolis, MD: Frank Gumpert Printing, 2001), 18.

[4] Smith then established Smith Brothers Marine Company, which is still in existence. Trott, 18; site visit made November 2004.

[5] Dorothy Lee Dunham, *Galesville, Maryland: Its History and Its People* (Severna Park, MD: The Paper Mill, 1980), 44.

a business that does custom boat building and yacht carpentry, used one of the buildings and the other stands empty.[6]

DESCRIPTION

The F. & H. Benning Company operated out of two buildings off Benning Road in Galesville. When entering the property, a building that formerly housed the grinding mill is located to the left. Fronting the water is another building used for processing seafood. Both are post and beam structures constructed on brick foundations and clad in corrugated metal siding.

The building used in part at least for shell processing is approximately 40' x 52' (2,090 square feet) and has a gable roof of corrugated metal. A sliding door on the front façade facilitated shipping of goods. A standard sized door and small glass windows irregularly punctuate the front façade as well. Shed additions attached to the right of the building may have been used for equipment storage or for shell storage since there are a large number of discarded shells in this area. This building is currently used by the Mast & Mallet Company for storage of boats and equipment.[7]

The shell processing building is separated from the packing building by a drive that leads to the waterfront. The main space of the packing building measures 60' x 34' (2040 square feet) with an attached shed-roofed addition on the east side for processing and bathroom facilities measuring 35' x 20'. The front (south) façade has small windows and a doorway. The front room of the building was used for shucking with shucking tables still lining the walls. The table surfaces and floor are of concrete since shucking was a wet process and one that required the floors to be regularly hosed down to clean them of debris and maintain sanitary conditions. Concrete also weathered the abrasive shells and wet conditions better than wood so it was the flooring material of choice. At the rear of the shucking room is a loft space on the second floor with a stairway providing access. As a result, this part of the shucking room has a drop ceiling while the front is open to the rafters. In the loft, a large window is located at the gable end is located, perhaps so that a conveyor system could bring fresh oysters from the waterfront below directly to the shucking room, although it would have been difficult to transport the oysters down the stairs to the shuckers.[8]

A door from the shucking room opens to an adjacent room probably used for processing the oyster meat as evidenced by the extant sink and steam pipes, which would have been necessary for the operation of the equipment. The room held a great deal of material at the time of the site visit in 2004, so the floors were not apparent but the walls are sided in wood.

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[6] Trott, 18; Dunham, 45; site visit made November 2004.
[7] The interior of the building was inaccessible during the site visit made in November 2004.
[8] For more information on the jobs done in an oyster packing plant, see Paula J. Johnson, " 'Sloppy Work for Women': Shucking Oysters on the Patuxent," in Paula J. Johnson, ed. *Working the Water: The Commercial Fisheries of Maryland's Patuxent River* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1988).

Adjacent to this room are a bathroom and washroom as well as a boiler room to the rear. The steam boiler is still extant and marked with the trademark Tradeo & Smark. No information has been found on this company. The boiler room also has a tank elevated on scaffolding, marked Knoxville, Tennessee, and is connected to numerous pipes that run throughout the building. Steam was used to sanitize equipment in the oyster industry. A sanitary inspection from the 1920s in company records indicates that inspectors checked that equipment was being sterilized in live steam or boiling water, that containers, carriers and utensils were being cleaned in hot and cold jets, and that oysters being cleaned in tanks with running water.[9]

Little equipment remains in the buildings from the Benning Company era, but an artifact exchange that took place in June 1977 in which the Benning's operating equipment was donated to the Calvert Marine Museum in Solomons, Maryland and the Mariners Museum in Newport News, Virginia reveals that they had the standard equipment used in oyster processing plants across the state. This included a blow tank, which operated by blowing air through a tank of water to clean the oyster meat of any residual particles of sand, shell or dirt. Other pieces of equipment included shucking stands, upon which shuckers stood to elevate them above the cold, wet, shell-strewn floors, as well as oyster measures and shipping containers.[10]

F. & H. BENNING COMPANY OPERATIONS

The F. & H. Benning Company, "Dealers in Oysters, Lime, Soft Crabs and Fish," was a profitable venture. Brothers Frank and Harry harvested oysters from the nearby West River, Hollon Point, Eastern Bay and Annapolis.[11] Harry Benning, who appears to have served as the salesman for the business, sold oysters and fish to numerous markets, predominately ones in the region. The ledgers show clients in the District of Columbia (which made good business sense since oysters sold there for 50 cents more than in the oversaturated markets of Baltimore) and Maryland.[12] In 1934, for example, the Benning Company had an agreement with The Economy Fish and Poultry Market, Inc. at 706 P Street, NW in Washington, DC that they would deliver 125 gallon lots at Economy's office, with the first shipment scheduled for February 1, 1943 continuing every week until March 29, 1934.[13] Customers in DC and Maryland included oyster houses, seafood companies, packing operations, and markets.[14] The Bennings not only sold

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[9] Sanitary inspection report, October 30, 192? (date illegible), CMM MS 009, F. & H. Benning Collection, Box 1, Calvert Marine Museum Library (hereafter cited as CMM Library).
[10] Artifact exchange, June 1997, CMM 76, 423, F. & H. Benning Collection, Folder, CMM Library.
[11] Ledgers, 1920s-30s, CMM MS 009, F. & H. Benning Collection, Box 1, CMM Library.
[12] Dunham, 45.
[13] Ledgers, CMM MS 009, F. & H. Benning Collection, Box 3, CMM Library.
[14] The ledgers provide specific company names and locations. In the 1910s in Washington, DC, customers included: James Hall & Co. of 204 9th Street, NW; Ideal Packing Company; J. H. Chivell of 11th Street on the wharf, SW; and Britzell Oyster House, 2139 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW. In Maryland in the 1910s, the Bennings sold to: The Atlantic Packing Company on 606 Water Street, Baltimore; Boston Fish & Oyster House in Cumberland, Maryland; John G. Wagner & Co. of 104 Dover Street, Baltimore; Leib Packing Company of 100 Market Place, Baltimore; and Trover Brothers Co. of 414-16 N. Front Street, Baltimore (see Ledgers, 1910s, CMM MS 009, F. & H. Benning Collection, Boxes 1 and 3, CMM Library). In the 1920s and 1930s, the Bennings sold to a number of operations,

fresh oysters but also packed them. Labels and tags reveal the company identified itself as an "Oyster Packing Company."[15]

The Bennings focused their operation as much on oyster shells as the meat. One byproduct of oyster shells is lime, an important component of fertilizer and a necessary product in the agricultural community of Galesville. The Bennings reportedly operated two lime kilns in which to burn the oyster shells to make lime.[16] Another option was to burn shells directly in the fields. Locals would purchase shells from the Bennings, collect brush in the middle of their field, put a pile of oyster shells on top, and set the whole pile alight. The lime released from the shells could fertilize the field for years.[17] They also crushed oyster shells in a large grinding mill and shipped it out in 100 pound containers as a soil additive (for more information on the Benning's grinding mill, see HAER No. MD-135).[18] The primacy of lime in their advertisements reveals its importance in their operations. One extant notice states "When You Want Lime Come to See Us," promising shell lime would be available "the whole season through."[19]

In order to carry out their shucking, packing, and grinding operations, the Bennings employed seasonal help. Company ledgers provide some information on the shuckers, including that most came from Baltimore. They also indicate a surprising lack of female shuckers despite the historic prevalence of women in this occupation.[20] In the 1940s and 1950s, the Benning company had 125 people employed shucking oysters. During this period, employees shucked about 800 bushels of oysters a day, totaling 125,000 gallons a season.[21] Some of the workers may have lived onsite, with oral history suggesting there may have been two small structures for worker housing adjacent to the shell processing building.[22] Providing housing for employees was not an uncommon occurrence in the seafood processing industry. Woodfield Fish & Oyster Company, a competitor, rented housing to its workers. The recently renovated worker housing

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including Crisfield Fish Company, Standard Fish & Produce Company, Baltimore Fish & Oyster Company, Croxton Oyster House, Lansburgh Seafood Co., OE Wentworth Company, and Economy Fish Market, as well to private individuals (see Ledgers, CMM MS 009, F. & H. Benning Collection, Boxes 1 and 3, CMM Library).

[15] Label, CMM MS 009, F. & H. Benning Collection, Box 2, CMM Library. One letter shows how presumably the National Recovery Act impacted canning operations. A letter from the Steel and Tin Products Co. Inc. of Baltimore dated August 23, 1933 notified customers that "under these codes we MAY not be able to run the factory on Saturdays during the Fall and Winter. Also, with the number of hours per day rigidly fixed, we might have to stop on the middle of a shipment. If true, we suggest (1) you have no Saturday shipments and (2) when possible, you give us orders one day in advance. It might be well to keep one shipment numbered, packed and ready." (Letter from President, Steel and Tin Products Co., Inc., 2100 Aliceanna St., Baltimore, MD to Benning Oyster Company, dated August 23, 1933, CMM MS 009, F. & H. Benning Collection, Box 4, Folder 1, CMM Library.)

[16] Dunham, 45; Trott, 18. They also had lime licenses in the 1940s and 1950s, which can be seen in CMM MS 009, F. & H. Benning Collection, Box 2, CMM Library.

[17] Information from Mr. Crandell, owner of the property in 2004.

[18] Tag, F. & H. Benning Collection, CMM MS 009, Box 2, CMM Library.

[19] Notice, F. & H. Benning Collection, CMM MS 009, Box 4, Folder 2, CMM Library.

[20] See Paula Johnson, " 'Sloppy Work for Women': Shucking Oysters in the Patuxent," in Paula J. Johnson, ed., *Working the Water: The Commercial Fisheries of Maryland's Patuxent River* (Charlottesville, VA: The University of Virginia Press, 1988).

[21] Dunham, 45.

[22] Telephone conversation with Eric J. Steinlein, Jr., December 2004. He stated that two African American families lived in tar paper shanties on the property, which were later torn down. No evidence of these currently exists.

was still extant in 2004. Working and living in proximity created a sense of conviviality. In *Galesville, Maryland: The Legend... The Legacy*, Jean Siegert Trott remembered that after dinner (provided by the Benning Company), the employees would gather at her grandfather's nearby store to socialize and listen to the radio.[23]

CONCLUSION

The last half of the twentieth century saw a steady decline in the oyster industry mostly due to overharvesting, water pollution, and the occurrence of oyster diseases like MSX (multinucleate sphere unknown) and Dermo forcing oyster companies across the state to close. The F. & H. Benning Company buildings stand as remnants of Maryland's once great oyster industry. They are a component of a vernacular waterfront landscape composed of seafood processing and packing operations that once characterized Maryland's shoreline communities.

[23] Trott, 18.

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